

CANINE DISTEMPER

Description

Canine distemper is a highly contagious disease of wild and domestic carnivores. Distemper is caused by a virus that has a broad host range among North American carnivores including the gray fox, raccoons, coyotes, skunks, and weasels. Canine distemper virus is related to rubeola (red measles) but poses no known threat to humans.

Distemper occurs most often in raccoons throughout the Southeastern U.S. and is cyclic in nature, tending to show up approximately every five to seven years. It may appear as sporadic isolated cases or in widespread outbreaks. In wild animals, the juveniles are more susceptible to the infection; therefore, the majority of cases are seen in the spring and summer when juvenile populations are at their highest levels. However, distemper outbreaks may occur year round.

Transmission

A healthy animal may contract canine distemper from direct contact with an infected animal or its bodily secretions and waste. Under most environmental conditions the virus does not survive long outside the body; therefore, transmission requires close interaction between animals to enable direct contact or aerosol exposure.

Infected animals may shed the virus starting approximately five days after infection, for a period of as long as six weeks or until death.

Unvaccinated dogs and cats are susceptible to contracting the disease. **Pet owners are reminded to keep their pet vaccinations up to date.**

Many of the symptoms displayed by an animal with distemper are very similar to symptoms displayed by a rabid animal (only testing of brain tissue can determine if an animal is rabid). **Although distemper poses no threat to humans, any one bitten or scratched by a raccoon must contact their physician immediately.** Exposure to a rabies vector species (raccoons, coyotes and foxes) may be fatal. Rabies has been documented in east Tennessee and an aggressive oral vaccination program has been initiated.

Clinical Signs

Symptoms of the disease are similar in all susceptible species. The symptoms include distress, coughing, sneezing, diarrhea, discharge from eyes and/or nostrils, eyelids that are crusted over and stuck together, and hardened footpads.

Infected animals may have convulsions, tremors and chewing fits. These animals may lose their fear of humans, become aggressive, appear blind, stumble and fall. Infected animals may exhibit stupor, paralysis, coma, and convulsions. An infected animal that is typically nocturnal may be observed in the daylight wandering aimlessly.

Diagnosis

Definitive diagnosis is based on laboratory analysis of affected tissues by fluorescent antibody techniques.

Canine distemper runs its course rapidly. Distemper is often fatal and death is usually attributed to a secondary infection such as pneumonia. Not all raccoons get the disease and many survive the outbreaks.

No specific drug is available that will kill the virus in infected animals. An animal that is symptomatic can not be treated; therefore, infected animals should not be handled by the public.

Other diseases which may mimic distemper include rabies, tularemia, histoplasmosis (raccoons) and poisonings. Raccoon rabies was first documented in east Tennessee in 1993,

Significance

In Tennessee, die-offs of raccoons due to canine distemper occur regularly. Outbreaks of canine distemper may have a significant impact on local or regional populations of raccoons, gray foxes and skunks in parts of the United States. The transmission of canine distemper is likely density-dependent; the disease poses a threat mainly to concentrated populations of previously unexposed susceptible species.

Canine distemper is of no public health significance to humans.

Dealing with Distemper

- ✓ Keep pets and children away from sick raccoons. As distemper progresses, the animal may appear calm, but may become aggressive if approached.
- ✓ Feed pets indoors.
- ✓ Those who feed their pets outdoors should take special care to remove any leftover food. It can attract infected animals not completely debilitated by the disease.
- ✓ Pet owners must get their pets vaccinated.
- ✓ Make sure garbage cans are secure and can not be knocked over or their lids removed.
- ✓ If you have a compost pile with food scraps, make sure the pile is securely covered in bins that raccoons can not access.
- ✓ Sick raccoons may pass through your yard and move on. If a raccoon dies in your yard, bury it deep enough to discourage pets from digging it up or double bag and dispose of animal in the trash. Do not touch animal, wear rubber gloves when disposing of animal.
- ✓ Never attempt to capture or aid any sick wildlife. Once symptomatic, no treatment is available, the disease must run its course.
- ✓ **PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE RACCOONS!!** Feeding wild animals may lead to large concentrations of animals around food; therefore increasing the spread of the disease.